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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by African Women's Association, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement*

1. An acknowledgement is in order. It is, to say the least, regrettable, if not unacceptable, that although the States Members of the United Nations have ratified various international instruments to protect and defend human rights, girls seeking access to high-quality education and careers in the sciences, as well as full employment and decent work, continue to suffer abuse and discrimination.

2. The Cameroonian Government has not only ratified the human rights conventions and protocols, in particular, those on the promotion of women's rights, for example, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, but has also put in place a set of implementing measures to facilitate access by youth to education and training. These include, among others, its poverty reduction strategy paper, which institutionalizes tuition-free education in all public elementary schools. As part of its official duties, the Cameroonian Government's Ministry for the Advancement of Women and the Family has created "women's centres", a kind of training centre for young women, throughout the national territory. These Government actions are bolstered by other private initiatives, such as the support which the Association des Femmes Scientifiques provides to young women interested in careers in the sciences.

3. All these efforts are practically for naught, however, and somewhat useless compared to what is needed and the social demand for education and the training of women on the ground. Should we give in to discouragement, or identify the origin of the evil? No one would say outright that the reason is simple: household poverty! That the economic crisis has thrown thousands of unemployed into the street! That sluggish sales of cash crops on the global market have plunged many planters into disarray! Its causes are multiple but it is nonetheless worth noting that a veritable campaign for responsible parents and education to change mentalities is truly necessary! Surveys and testimony taken on the ground have brought to light cases in which parents regarded their daughters as "plantains from the fields, ready to be sold as soon as they are ripe"! The births of the majority of these girls are not registered with their local vital statistics offices. What kind of better future or stable job can they possibly aspire to? The most controversial aspect is that it is common and natural, even permissible, for a parent to invest heavily in the education of a son and do the complete opposite for a daughter: some sort of training as a household worker is the most she can hope for.

4. Given this situation, innovative strategies are needed in order to successfully implement a gender approach, namely, girls must be provided with high-quality education and training and their access to full employment and decent work must be guaranteed. Clearly, this will entail the removal of certain obstacles at both the family level, by raising awareness and offering support to the most deprived families through the improvement of their living conditions, and at the level of the individual herself. As the completion of secondary education is very daunting for girls, granting them scholarships and various subsidies would give them an additional boost. The establishment of flexible arrangements for obtaining supplies and textbooks by distributing books at cooperatives while a course is in session and collecting them when classes are over are proposals that should be taken seriously, and which should be appealing to any good policymaker. It is therefore entirely

* Issued without formal editing.

natural to support the opening of State-subsidized canteens, since the daily diet of the majority of these girls is not balanced.

5. Lastly, with regard to professional training, the ministerial departments in charge of training young people will ensure that it is geared to the ultimate goal and environment of those young people. In other words, they will promote gender equality in their programmes and pave the way for better socio-economic integration of girls.

6. In concluding this chapter, we should not overlook the strides that have been made in the promotion of women's rights throughout the subregion, in Cameroon and in many other developing countries. However, our communities must recognize that only the liberation of girls from the burden of sexist stereotyping will mark the beginning of a free and prosperous world!

Elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against girls

1. In accordance with article 1 of the Convention, discrimination shall mean "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex [...] in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field". This Convention, moreover, enshrines equality between men, "men" being construed as "individual", consistent with the meaning established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

2. History demonstrates that the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which Cameroon ratified in 1994 has transformed mentalities but one cannot reasonably speak of total elimination of discrimination against women in general and girls in particular. The various forms of discrimination against girls persist and one is more insidious than the next. All these things seriously compromise and endanger the full development of the future woman in this paradoxal Cameroon of ours, torn between its traditional heritage and its quest for modernity. Closer consideration of the question forces us to dwell on those phenomena which tarnish the image of the Cameroonian woman, and in a larger sense, the African woman: forced marriages, female circumcision, trafficking, domestic work, sexual tourism and prostitution.

3. Any well-informed observer will tell you — even if there are no reliable statistics on the matter — that to this day, girls are sometimes forced to marry older men merely to satisfy the greed of their parents, who make a fortune on the dowry. This happens time and time again in the northern part of the country. In the northwest, girls who remain under their parents' control risk becoming victims of forced marriage, trafficking or domestic work. The coastal areas are rife with girls forced into prostitution and sexual tourism by their own families for one reason and one reason only: to bring money home to feed the family.

4. From a cursory reading of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is evident that signatory States recognize children's inalienable rights to education, health, nutrition, a home, recreation and well-being. This Convention does not discriminate against any child, boy or girl, in the enjoyment of these rights. Conversely, in our families, the current practice is to sacrifice a girl's education for a boy's education.

5. The State, with a view to reversing the trend towards repeated violence against and abuse of children, promulgated Act No. 015 of December 2005 against trafficking and exploitation of child labour in the national territory. Despite social

mobilization and opinion polls by civil society organizations, the persistence of cultural and social obstacles aggravates the marginalization of girls in Cameroon. What makes this all the more deplorable, moreover, is that these child victims of rape, bodily injury from beatings and deprivation of their most basic rights, are without social protection. While the phenomenon of domestic work is certainly common, it is no less true that out of 100 child domestic workers, 98 are girls.

6. In any case, we cannot really understand this situation, which is an obstacle to development and to the full development of girls! Is it usage and customs? Is it poverty that drives parents to degrade women? Nonetheless, we remain convinced that one day, with the many initiatives that are under way in our country and the lobbying of national opinion, this evil that impedes the development of women and tarnishes their image will be no more than a bad memory.